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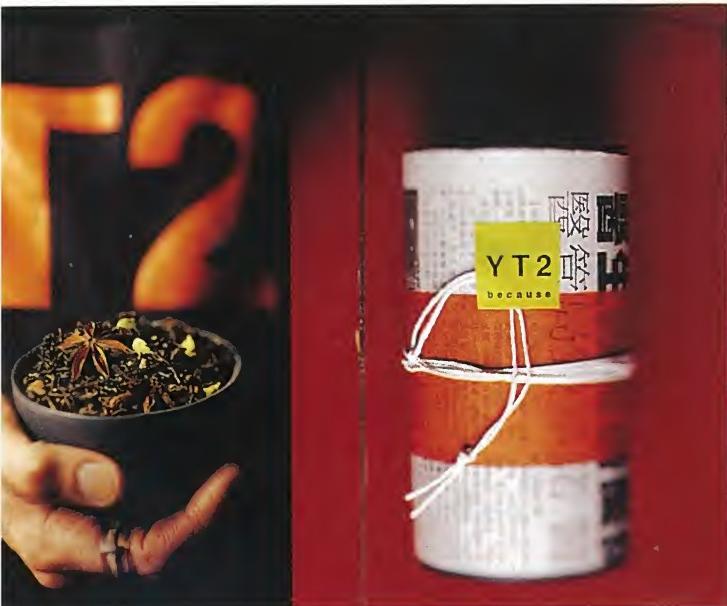
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PRINT POST APPROVED PP255003108
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to a tea

Jan O'Connor and Maryanne Shearer of Melbourne's Tea Too are elevating tea to the hippest sip around, while Donna Hay's recipes take tea beyond the traditional pot

Photography ADRIAN LANDER. Editor and food DONNA HAY. Words STEPHANIE WOOD

Far from the quaint stereotype of geriatric tea drinkers lives Melbourne's Tea Too, Jan O'Connor (opposite, left) and Maryanne Shearer's enticing, modern tea emporium. Customers can sample up to 200 varieties of tea at the tea bar – inspired by a contemporary take on Chinese design – or take home their favourite brew wrapped in Tea Too's signature funky packaging (above).

Jan O'Connor and Maryanne Shearer embellish, fuel and finish each other's sentences, simpatico business partners to the last word. "Tea was boring," says Maryanne. "Tea was for grannies," Jan adds, recalling images of tea-cosies and doilies and floral fine bone china teacups. But combine Jan's background as an architect and experience developing retail concepts with Maryanne's fashion and visual merchandising history and there was no chance that tea's old-fashioned image was going to escape unscathed.

Four years ago, the pair bravely launched their avant-garde teashop, Tea Too, into Melbourne's coffee heartland, Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. With its bold burnt-orange palette, walls papered in pages from Chinese

newspapers, and range of stylishly packaged teas from around the world, Tea Too had an immediate impact. Late last year the partners opened their second shop in the monolithic Chadstone shopping centre.

"There were a million coffee shops, but no teashops as we envisaged them, which was contemporary," says Maryanne.

The foray into selling tea came almost by accident. Both women had a passion for retail and design and had been working for other people when they met five years ago. "It was when that whole lifestyle and homewares thing really started kicking in. Everyone was talking about this new direction in homewares, and we wanted to be part of that," says Maryanne.

Jan quit her job as a retail architect with Coles Myer, cashed in her super and did ►

tea bar



people



Lapsang-souchong-smoked beef fillet

Tea Too offers more than just blends for a warming cuppa (clockwise, from left): Donna Hay's recipe pairs smoky lapsang souchong with rare beef; lemon shortbread for the ritual tea-break; vitamin-C-packed, caffeine-free ruby red rosehip – one of the many herbal teas available in the store; Soft Spice tea gives a subtle cinnamon flavour to syrup cake, while Botanica tea adds vanilla notes to a refreshing jelly; personal infusers – one of many tools on sale for tea making; the new favourite: green tea.





"There were a million coffee shops, but no teashops as we envisaged them."

a business course, and then the pair did a full business plan for their new company, Contents Homewares, which was to be "very Habitat, very Conran". They took off overseas, to look at products and to attend Frankfurt's esteemed Ambiente Fair, and it was there, where they encountered other Australian companies with very similar thoughts to their own, that their carefully laid business plans started to waver.

The concept for Tea Too was "thrown together overnight" when they returned to Melbourne. "It wasn't until we got home and looked at all the products we had in my back room," says Jan, "that we realised that, apart from endless vases, there was lots of tea paraphernalia, and we hadn't even noticed we had it. All of a sudden there was the light bulb." Says Maryanne, "We had been working on this homewares thing for a good six months; we had been talking about it, fantasising about it, planning it... And then we were sitting in this back room – it would have been three hours – and we had named Tea Too, come up with the concept for Tea Too... We just gelled."

The pair were amazed that no-one else had cottoned onto a tea concept shop. "We realised it hadn't been attacked as such," says Maryanne. "Fondled," adds Jan.

While Maryanne researched and sourced the products Tee Too's shelves would carry – the English breakfasts, the Australian herb teas, the Ceylon gunpowder, the Japanese genmaicha sencha, the strainers, infusers, pots, cups and saucers, porcelain – Jan worked on the store design, putting an Oriental theme at its core. "It just seemed to fall into place quickly," she says. "We went back to the origin of tea, which is China, and the imagery of tea and imagery of China."

The resulting Fitzroy shop is striking, and the key design elements have been carried through to the Chadstone space: polished concrete floors, strong oranges, greens and pinks, Oriental chests, drawers and tables that recall ancient Chinese herbal-medicine shops, and walls papered with Chinese newspaper pages, which Jan thinks came about "because we had no money".

A multiplicity of swish packaging has always been a central tenet of Tea Too: black canisters, silver-foil bags, orange-wrapped boxes and white takeaway noodle-box-style boxes with swing wire handles all bear simple T2 labels and share shelf and table space with white teapots and lidded teacups, Moroccan tea glasses, tea bag squeezers, bagged sugar cubes and books on tea.

Dozens of teas are displayed in white bowls for sniffing and studying, and handwritten blackboards offer information: "green tea: a refreshing taste low in caffeine, high in anti-oxidants". Some customers spend more than half an hour moving through the store's displays. "The main thing was to offer variety," says Maryanne, "from a comparison, say, to a Tetley, right up to the most superb green tea you can find out of China."

Tea Too is user-friendly, affordable and engaging. "The packaging, the product, the stores are very customer oriented, but also we try to incorporate our own personal aesthetics," says Jan.

"It's an emotional approach to a product – you can take something very ►

Crème tea sabayon

basic and very normal and really have some fun... Take it out of the depths of the last century," finishes Maryanne.

While English breakfast teas are the biggest sellers, the pair are seeing great interest in green teas. "We're really concentrating on Chinese and green teas – we really believe in them; it's not just a fad – they're beautiful teas and no-one is doing them," says Maryanne.

Needless to say, the pair are both tea drinkers. In fact, Jan claims never to have had a cup of coffee. "I don't like the smell of it, the taste of it... It's a bit of a family thing; my parents and grandparents have never drunk coffee – that's the Irish working-class background." Her tea preferences are for assam and breakfast teas. "I drink the herbal teas, but I drink them therapeutically," she says.

Maryanne professes to be "a bit of a herbal lady – I'd have to say China Rose and the green teas are my favourites".

As for the future, Jan and Maryanne hope to have a Tea Too web site up and running by the end of the year and are looking at opening Tea Too shops in Melbourne and Sydney CBDs – teashops for 21st century grannies. ■

Tea Too, 340 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, and Shop 140b Chadstone Shopping Centre, Chadstone, Victoria.

Stephanie Wood is co-editor of The Age Good Food Guide 2000 and the editor of The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald's Uncorked magazine.

RECIPES

LAPSANG-SOUCHONG-SMOKED BEEF FILLET

2 tablespoons lapsang souchong tea*
2 tablespoons sugar
2 tablespoons rice
500g beef eye fillet, trimmed
4 leeks, halved
1 tablespoon olive oil
100g baby rocket leaves
sea salt and ground black pepper
Preheat oven to 180°C. Combine tea, sugar and rice. Place the tea mixture into a piece of aluminium foil and place in the base of a wok. Rest a rack over the tea and place the beef on the rack. Cover wok with a tight-fitting lid, place over medium-high heat and allow the tea to smoke for 5 minutes. Remove beef from wok, place on a baking tray and bake for 5–8 minutes, or until cooked to your liking. Meanwhile, brush the leeks with oil and cook in a frying pan or grill pan over high heat for 4 minutes each side, or until golden and soft. Slice beef thinly and serve on top of leeks and rocket leaves, sprinkled with salt and pepper. Serves 4

CRÈME TEA SABAYON

1/3 cup boiling water
2 tablespoons crème brûlée or caramel or vanilla tea*
4 egg yolks
4 tablespoons sugar
1 tablespoon marsala
1/2 cup cream, whipped
thin sweet biscuits to serve
Place boiling water and tea in a bowl and allow to steep for 5 minutes. Strain and set aside. Place egg yolks, sugar and marsala in a heat-proof bowl. Place the bowl over a saucepan of simmering water. With a whisk or electric beater, beat the mixture until thick ribbons form (this will take around 4–5 minutes). Remove bowl from saucepan and continue beating for 1 minute. Fold through tea and whipped cream. Serve immediately with thin sweet biscuits. Serves 4

BOTANICA TEA JELLY

2 tablespoons Botanica* or summer-fruit-based tea
500ml hot water
1 1/2 tablespoons gelatine
1/2 cup sugar
Place tea and water in a jug and allow to steep for 5 minutes. Strain and place the liquid in a saucepan over medium heat. Sprinkle gelatine over the tea and stir until dissolved. Add sugar, bring to the boil and stir to dissolve. Remove from heat and allow to cool slightly. Pour jelly into 4 glasses and refrigerate for 2 hours, or until firm. Serves 4

SOFT SPICE TEA SYRUP CAKE

185g butter
3/4 cup sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
3 eggs
1 1/2 cups plain flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
TEA SYRUP
3 tablespoons Soft Spice* or cinnamon-and-vanilla-based tea
2 cups boiling water
1 cup sugar
Preheat oven to 160°C. To make cake, place butter and sugar in a bowl and beat until light and creamy. Add vanilla and eggs, one at a time, and beat well. Sift together flour and baking powder into butter mixture. Pour mixture into a 20cm square greased or lined cake tin and bake for 45 minutes, or until cake is cooked when tested with a skewer. While cake is cooking, make the tea syrup. Place tea and boiling water in a saucepan and allow to steep for 5 minutes, then strain. Return liquid to saucepan over medium-high heat, add sugar and stir to dissolve. Bring syrup to the boil and simmer for 5 minutes. Pour hot syrup over hot cake in tin. Stand for 2 minutes, then slice and serve. Serves 10–12

* All teas available from Tea Too